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## Disruptions—An interview with Jacques Rancière

### Dwaipayan Chowdhury with Jacques Rancière

**ABSTRACT** This interview concerns the premise of 'aesthetics', as a certain regime of identification, which intervenes within the domain of 'politics' and 'history of art', as configured in the ideations of Jacques Rancière. From this general premise the discussion provokes us to particularly re-configure the concept of 'modernism' in art that is not solely defined through simplistic comparisons with 'post-modernism'. Instead, a re-configuration of 'modernism' lets us reconsider the 'Avant Garde' project from the methodology of an 'aesthetic community' formulated during the French revolution existing still in the texts of the young Marx of the 1840s. The logic of representations in art moves beyond the objective structures of 'Dialectical Reason', and instead gets aligned to the aesthetic logic of being spatio-temporally 'surplus'. Furthermore, it is the aesthetic logic that introduces the heterogeneity of political symbolizations that underlines a multiplicity of process as against a distinct strategy linking theory and practice thus even challenging a global rationality of defining 'what is art?' (Art History) and 'what is politics?' (Politics). It is based upon these contingent reversals of the signification of the world, of trying to identify the singular points of disruptions connecting to or not connecting to make a whole, that the interview concludes with questions on the multiplicity of possibles.

#### I

Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence

*W. B. Yeats*

With this reference from *Sailing to Byzantium* the art historian Clement Greenberg takes us to a quandary.<sup>1</sup> This quandary pertains to the efficacy of (western) art in general with regard to the operations of artistic systems. With "of its own" Yeats takes us to the magnificence of the monuments. For Greenberg, what is at stake in this journey to magnificence is the establishment of the cleavage, within the integrity of artistic systems, that chalks out two paths. This introductory exposition will deal with the character of the cleavage and its two paths. Our aim will be to place this interview within the backdrop of the cleavage in the first half of the twentieth century thus announced by Greenberg.

The first path is the path of autonomy of art. In fact, this path leads nowhere, wherefore lies its significance. I shall also deal with another path that leads to nowhere. Therefore, we must differentiate between the first path and the second path. I read the significance of the first path, as explicated in Greenberg's thesis on the avant-garde, as a complete containment within the formal features of art at the expense of its content.<sup>2</sup> How is this complete reversal to form achieved as the main component of artistic autonomy? What is this artistic autonomy? How does Greenberg locate the avant-garde?

The problem that Greenberg poses is fundamentally based upon the constitution of objects in/as art.

Before defining artistic autonomy, we shall first define in a cursive way, the object that is constituted. The object I refer to here might be determined through the Kantian *matter*. In

Kant, *matter* is ensconced in the object within the empirical domain. *Matter* is placed within the triadic relation between sensation, appearance and form.<sup>3</sup> The three concepts of sensation, appearance and form are categorized as follows: sensation is the affect of the objects where the object effects a capacity for representation; appearance is the undetermined object where the object has already effected a representation; form is that which orders the manifold undetermined appearances in certain determined relations, i.e., the domain of the *a priori* or knowledge removed from all sensations and hence is the domain of concepts.<sup>4</sup> Contrarily, *matter* is the content of appearance that only corresponds to sensation and therefore can never be conceptual.<sup>5</sup> From such a categorization one might label the sensation of *matter* as the paradigm of experience, i.e., if we consider experience as that domain of non-knowledge brought about by pure content.<sup>6</sup> Thus, through a brief definition of the object we have before us its three properties: content, appearance, and form. Now we go back to Greenberg to elaborate upon his conception of constituting objects in/as art. The conception that, I argue, embarks on the path to artistic autonomy, a path to nowhere.

The artistic system of the avant-garde, for Greenberg, was a moment of culmination in history, the abstractions of which were formulated through a “detaching.”<sup>7</sup> This detachment that Greenberg refers to as an “emigration from bourgeois society to Bohemia” was not only a repudiation of bourgeois politics, but also a retreat from public that even downplayed revolutionary politics.<sup>8</sup> Such a detachment tears apart the figure of the citizen-artist, a figure that somebody like a Plekhanov tried to recover even in Pushkin’s condemnation of the public (“Begone, ye pharisees! What cares / The peaceful poet for your fate?”).<sup>9</sup> Here, we arrive at that inexhaustible polemical stance—art for art’s sake. But how does such a stance constitute the object? Precisely by what Greenberg dubs as the avant-gardist “expression of the absolute.”<sup>10</sup> The absolute is the process where “content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”<sup>11</sup> The absolute process is not relative and does not get involved in the contradictions of society. This process is nothing but the constitution of the object as appearance, without content, i.e., the constitution of the object as the appearance of pure form. But what is this pure form that Greenberg rates so highly for the avant-garde and that is simultaneously the principle component of artistic autonomy? The pure form is the principle of abstraction that for Greenberg has a genesis at a specific moment in history, i.e., modernity. We are concerned here with the principle of abstraction in modernity that Greenberg develops.

The principle of abstraction is the principle of non-representationality which, however, is not arbitrary. Abstract constitution of the object is the imitation (Greenberg applies the term in the Aristotelian sense) of the process of constitution itself. The artist treats the secondary relative quality of experience only by reverting to the primary absolute process. What he imitates is the discipline and processes of art. This imitating of imitation is not arbitrary because it has to obey the rules of a first, an original discipline of the medium. Once the content has been rejected, appearance is constrained by a self-imitation of pure form. Pure form imitating itself is the fact that the medium of art replaces the content of art. The medium becomes art’s content. This constraint of the medium, which in its autonomy, establishes form as the content of form. The condition of art is self-constrained, through an original restriction, to imitate the disciplines and processes of art. Such a reiteration of the medium Greenberg hails as the “genesis of the abstract.”<sup>12</sup>

Medium constitutes the object as medium. This principle of abstraction is the basis from which Greenberg calls Surrealism “reactionary.”<sup>13</sup> Why? Because Surrealism’s preoccupation did not lie solely with artistic means. Rather than a sole engagement with arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, and colors, a painter like Dalí had a tendency to

restore “outside” objects.<sup>14</sup> This “outside” is the domain of appearance not as form but as the experience of content. Such an experience is nothing but the consciousness that connects art to real transformations in life. Rather, autonomy of art replaces any concepts of conscious experience with the processes of the medium and form: a novel about the novel, a painting about painting.

Autonomy, as the operation of the self-constrained artistic system that implodes the artwork, lends it depth. There is only one destination: nowhere. However, this path to nowhere is the path of intellect. Intellect is the absolute. The connoisseur gets drawn to the artwork’s beyond side, thus imbibed away from living. Evoking the stylistics of the Byzantium sojourn, one may conclude there is no country for old connoisseurs. The sensual music neglects old connoisseurs but the monument, as the monument of intellect, stands firm for them. Intellect decides, when Greenberg elevates a Picasso to a higher level than a Ripkin.<sup>15</sup> Ripkin’s realism hides the technique. As such, the content is laid bare to experience immediately, on the surface. Such a surficial mediation does not require a higher reflection of the intellect. This experience is of an immediate recognition that conjoins art and life. Because there is no discontinuity between art and life, the self-containment of the autonomous absolute is disrupted. On the contrary, Picasso’s abstraction keeps the medium specificity of the artistic system intact. The system attains autonomy because it lets one derive ultimate values from art at a second remove<sup>16</sup>—a second remove that finds a path beyond the immediate experience towards the intellectual absolute, the realm of the higher reflection of the connoisseurs.

The autonomy of the intellectual absolute replicates the autonomy of the Hegelian “scientific knowledge” of the arts.<sup>17</sup> In Hegel, knowledge determines the object of art through a formal constitution within the original restriction of the ever-evolving absolute form—totality. The science of totality cancels the immediacy of the object through a determination of historical phases, i.e., from whence the object is derived and towards what it progresses. Such a historicity of the object gets intertwined with the genealogy of the “lonely” artists of the avant-garde in Greenberg.<sup>18</sup> Autonomous historicity of forms is the determination of appearance to the absolute annihilation of content. At stake here is the intellectual audacity to be an intellectual without life. The monument perhaps would be more magnificent in its autonomy without a Yeats. We arrive nowhere.

## II

The second path is the path of the aesthetic regime of the arts, in other words, of the politics of aesthetics. Artistic autonomy considered aesthetics only as a relative value in the domain of experience.<sup>19</sup> As such aesthetics had to give way to absolute form. But a fundamental problem remains with autonomy: the problem of choice. Either Ripkin or Picasso. The choice is based on the historicity of the artistic constitution of the object, i.e., modernity, and ignores what is constituted, i.e., the object and its experience. There is no freedom in this choice. The arbitrary choice of form has an insufficient program because the form itself is both the immediate and the original. As a result, historicity is the sole condition that exists to the irrelevance of the particular object.

This irrelevance of the object, in turn, takes us to Adorno’s critique of Sartre’s dramas, dramas constructed through the necessity of choice of the characters. Adorno is concerned with the unfreedom of characters because of the fact that within the immediacy of an original choice the content remains intact as a predetermined reality.<sup>20</sup> The critique is both subjective and objective. The characters are not subjective because their choice keeps the ground of the administered world unaltered. The characters are not objective because they cannot divest themselves from their enclosed subjectivity to become a subject that registers the particular object in history. What I draw from this

critique, where the subject should register the object to become subjectively objective, is the annihilation of the necessity of historicity of the object. The object is no longer stuck within the cyclical loop of the Hegelian “scientific knowledge.” Ontologically speaking, being subjectively objective is the absence of Hegelian totality. It is never— neither the realist Ripkin or the modernist Picasso. Neither does a Rembrandt anticipate a Picasso. Rather, the object that was totally intellectualized in autonomy is available again to the domain of experience without completely foregoing the effective objectivity of forms. The object frees itself from the oppression of forms. Experience and knowledge coexist in an indeterminate state of balance, a path to nowhere. A state that Schiller calls aesthetics, a state of being, which is the springboard to Rancière’s politics of aesthetics and is fundamental to our title, disruptions. Disruptions might be considered as the original ground of historicity constructed through unfree choices, a trope central to politics of aesthetics.

Aesthetics as a state of being, as Schiller defines it, is the active determination of a free situation located at a medium position.<sup>21</sup> This free medium position contains an irreconcilable mutual negation, i.e., where both the sensation of content and the intellect of form is negated. Affirmation through negation, is the active determination of appearance where it does not have to suffer the torture of form or the promiscuity of content. Such is the state of the free in appearance.

Rancière’s system, if politics of aesthetics can be called a system at all, puts this state of the free at its centre. Aesthetics as configured by Rancière does not deal with art per se. Rather, politics of aesthetics, if it deals with art at all, treats aesthetics as a specific experience of pure art that leads to the self-suppression of art. As a result of this self-suppression art gets translated to life whereby aesthetics gets translated to aesthetico-politics. What gets disrupted is the separation of art and life that autonomous art promises. The tactic of disrupting the separation is a tactic of “aestheticization of common existence.”<sup>22</sup> Now, what is this aestheticization of common existence?

We start from the indistinctions of form and content innate to the free state. The indistinctions of the aesthetic state operate through Rancière’s insistence on Schiller’s *Spieltrieb* (play drive).<sup>23</sup> The *Spieltrieb* is the medium of translation enabled by aesthetics that disrupts the self-containment of art and conjugates it with life. The translation that reconstructs thus the edifice of both art and life is aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience transforms the historicity of the object as in modernity through the experience of an *and*. The *and* is the conjugation between autonomous art *and* its simultaneous grounding in life anticipating real transformations. Suspension of both the form and content in the medium position of balance is the experience of indeterminate indistinctions in appearance. The object emerges beyond any determination by knowledge, i.e., beyond any scope of reversal to the absolute as in autonomy. The ground of historicity that modernity bases itself upon crumbles.

What emerges in such experience directly affects common existence in everyday life. Aesthetic experience, as a domain of affect, disrupts modernity primarily by destabilizing its structures of judgment. These structures of judgment define themselves by articulating one’s appraisal of the object through concepts. This disarticulation in appraising inherent to aesthetic experience reconstitutes the object in a regime of indistinctions. Crucial here are these two expressions—first, the regime of indistinctions innate to aesthetic experience, and second, the mode of being affected by aesthetic experience.

With regard to the regime of indistinctions innate to aesthetic experience, we shall take a Deleuzian detour to reach the Rancièrian position. Indistinctions in Deleuze is a

condition of engaging with the world where being cannot refer to any model of legislation, i.e., cannot choose any preference. It is a world in process, an archipelago. Islands can never constitute a whole but are parts in a wall of uncemented stones floating in isolation and having a value in itself yet in relation to others.<sup>24</sup> The Deleuzian indistinctions thwart any reconciliation of the islands/parts to land/pure form because “truth has always had jagged edges.”<sup>25</sup> Rancière both agrees and disagrees with Deleuze. For Rancière, indistinctions in aesthetic experience operate until such indistinctions constitute objects in the domain of lived experiences debunking life as a transcendental field. What is meant by life as a transcendental field is the condition of life that does not refer to either a subject or an object but rather is the stream of an a-subjective consciousness, i.e., a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness without a self.<sup>26</sup> The life condition that Deleuze proposes is the condition of being that does not enable a transcendence of the form of wounds as a higher actuality. Rather wounds exist always within the milieu of experience. We reach an agreement between Deleuze and Rancière. Disagreement begins when Rancière equates the indistinctions of the Deleuzian archipelago image with a political indifference.<sup>27</sup> Rancière’s question is how one might articulate differences through the disruptions of the political community when common existence is premised solely on the indistinctions of the uncemented stones of the wall forever sliding up against each other?

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As such we have the return of a disruptive judgment in aesthetic experience which stalls affect to foreground its effect. The mode of being that is effected in this blockage is a constitution of the object through the actualization of *dissensus*. However, the effective dissensual mode of being is never completely rid of the affective dimension of aesthetic experience. Here again we confront the free zone of indistinctions where the subject emerges. The subject now activates or determines the impotent condition of experience through an imperative capacity of the aesthetic experience which leads to a repartitioning of the contours of common existence. The anticipation of the subject emerging in indistinctions was already prefigured by Arendt, in her critique of the declaration of the “Rights of Man” during the French revolution, in the context of the mass migrations of refugees following the first world war.<sup>32</sup> Arendt’s critique was primarily based on the alienation of the modernist subject position constituted in the Rights of Man even from those inalienable rights that make it impossible for a collective recognition. Such a human

condition is the condition of anonymity, i.e., a life without qualities. A bare condition of life, that Rancière calls “deprived life,” is a condition to which all human responsibilities are disallowed.<sup>33</sup> This is a life without personality. Such is the surplus condition of life without personality/form that lays bare the zone of indistinctions as opposed to any constitution within the “Rights of Man.”

The subject’s quest for a personality in the context of these rights and the subject position inherent to it takes the subject also to a path that leads nowhere. The mode of being tries to approach form, by determining the object, with the aim of staking a claim within the “Rights of Man.” But in the Rancièrian politics of aesthetics such a determination becomes impossible.<sup>34</sup> The mode of being can never constitute the object purely within the region of human rights. The pure region of human rights becomes a region of the already administered object. This administration is the administration that Foucault, in “Omnes et Singulatum,” develops as the theory of police. The police regime of state is its pastoral character, where the state departs from its ideological foundations, and becomes the shepherd exercising sheer control over life and bodies of the flock.<sup>35</sup> For Rancière even human rights, or the forms of philanthropy built on the ground of the “Rights of Man,” become a designation of the police to the extent that police does not refer to any institution but rather designates a management of lives, objects, and spaces, i.e., the management of the distribution of the sensible.<sup>36</sup>

A return of the mode of being to the sensible is a return to experience at the cost of pure rationality. Politics of aesthetics as an experience is a mode of being that constitutes the object as a mode that obstructs the Hegelian personality of the object always geared towards a reconciliation in absolute knowledge. The mode here is precisely that lacuna that Hegel faced with the Spinozist mode.<sup>37</sup> In Spinoza, as Macherey notes, the object is substance in indistinctions, i.e., without a measure of its difference to other objects and therefore lacking the individuality of the Hegelian being-in-itself/particular. Macherey further elaborates that unlike the Hegelian absolute where the object as being-in-itself is reconciled in absolute knowledge, the absolute in Spinoza is the interplay of a triad. This triad is the constitution of the development of the object: first, a *substantial identity* of the object completely withdrawn into itself; second, the external manifestation of object confirming the initial affirmation of *substantial identity* through a reflection in its *attributes*; third, the singular disposition of a passage whereby the *attribute* of the object attains the status of a *mode* reflecting the absolute process. The object is constituted as substance. If we follow Macherey’s study we might conclude that instead of the reconciliation of the object as knowledge as in Hegel, in Spinoza it decomposes to a nowhere. Aesthetic experience in the Rancièrian politics of aesthetics is the experience of such a passage to nowhere in appearance. The Rancièrian mode of being reconstitutes the object in the effective differences of singularities but simultaneously these singular reconstitutions are without measure, wherefore their affective potential. To go back to the monument in Byzantium, one might conclude then that the monument urgently requires the poet. Its magnificence is that each poet adorns it with new stones that are different but are so in their indistinctions. We arrive nowhere.

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**Dwaipayan Chowdhury: Your elucidation of the shortcoming of the notion of modernity is premised on the double failure of modernity both as the domain of the autonomy of art and as modernatism. By autonomy of art I mean the pure formal aspects of art where it only explores the capabilities of its specific medium. On the other hand by modernatism I refer to the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of arts that you point out as forms fulfilling a destiny specific to modernity which constitute a new region of being, the region of free play and appearance. You claim that the autonomy of art failed because of its distance from the numerous political possibilities innate to the**

mixture of genres and mediums. Conversely, modernism which emerged at the moment of the misplaced encounter between the artisans of a Marxist revolution and artisans of forms for a new way of life also could not hold. Modernism, defined in terms of the dual artistic response to, on the one hand an absolute forgetfulness about the Other, and on the other, the irreducible aspect of the unsymbolizable object, rather anticipate the aesthetic avant-garde. Now, this aesthetic avant-garde furthermore anticipates the egalitarian future even by eclipsing the role of the political avant-garde. Could you please elaborate upon this premise?<sup>38</sup>

**Jacques Rancière:** The point was about modernism and post-modernism. When I first really talked about aesthetics and art it was in response to a certain idea of the end of art or the end of aesthetics which was itself included in a view of the end of history. Post-modernism is a concept which has no real content. What I mean by that is that post-modernism does not really designate a specific form of art or a specific practice of thinking of art. It is supposed to designate the end of modernism as a certain idea of the development of history. It is a notion that means something to the extent that you agree with the idea of modernity and modernism that it presupposes. I argue that post-modernism is a concept entirely predicated on a kind of self-definition of modernity. To be short, I would say there are probably two levels in the definition of modernism and modernity. There is the concept of modernism that was elaborated around the 1940s by Clement Greenberg more or less in agreement with the thinking of the Frankfurt School that the idea of modernity in art means the autonomy of art which now deals with its own material, its own procedures, no more representations, etc.<sup>39</sup> Post-modernism was a response to that definition of modernity in art, but that definition is really a joke. If modernism means something in art and if avant-garde means something in art it does not mean that art now deals with its own practice, medium, and material. It means exactly the contrary: a certain idea of the conjunction of art and life. There is a second level. If we refuse this very simplistic notion of modernity and modernism, you have to consider what probably can be defined as a historical avant-garde project, which was a project of connection between art and life, based on the idea that art is able to create a new fabric of common life. This is linked with the historical experience of the revolutionary avant-garde in Soviet Union. But there is also the German avant-garde, Bauhaus let us say, crystallizing the experience of the first thirty years of the twentieth century. At this level you define a very different idea of what modernism and modernity is.

Simultaneously, there is a simplistic idea of this “avant-garde” project, that there was a faith in history, that there was a great dream of Western thinking to recreate the world and very often this is assimilated to the project of emancipation in general. There is often this kind of identification of the idea of the modernist project as a kind of global and historical faith in the development of history: the idea that the historical process will produce by itself a kind of global transformation of all political, social structures and the avant-garde project is thought as part of this big dream of Western reason. Things are much more complicated. There are at least two elements. First, at the moment of the French revolution there is idea of an “aesthetic community” which goes through the work of Schiller, Hölderlin, the young Hegel, the young Schelling. There was the idea that true revolution is not simply a revolution in the structures of power, in the law, in the state, but a revolution of the practical way of inhabiting the world. There was the idea of a revolution in the modes of being, perceiving, and doing. Then this project of a true sensible revolution was incorporated into the project of social emancipation. Think of the texts of young Marx in the 1840s when he opposes the human revolution to the political revolution which comes directly from this big project at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. There was this project of a revolution of the sensible that would be something stronger and more important than the political revolution.

Second, if an avant-garde project, if an aesthetic modernity means something, it means something in this context. There is also a third point about the very idea of avant-garde. There is a simplistic idea of the avant-garde of the proletariat, of those who have the Marxist science or those who are able to lead the masses with the light of science. Also, there is the idea of the avant-garde of the young who want to adhere to modernity, to electricity, to steel, iron, concrete, speed, etc. This idea of the avant-garde is associated with people implementing some kind of futurist project, like the futurist manifesto of Marinetti in the 1910s. So there is the idea of avant-garde as people fascinated with electricity, with cars, with speed, with machines, etc. I think these two visions, which are of the avant-garde as the people leading the cattle and the avant-garde as the futurists fascinated with the new technology are very simplistic. What is important is that the idea of the avant-garde is not so much of people going forward as much as it is the idea of people trying to deal with the contradiction of temporalities.

In my book *Aisthesis*, I commented on Emerson's "The Poet" from the 1840s which ideates that America is in a chaos. It is a chaos because at the same time you have economic modernity, industrial modernity, etc., but there is no common thread giving some kind of unity to this movement.<sup>40</sup> The idea that modernity is divided because there are lot of new things in the domain of material production, in the domain of economy, but there is no new form of being together. This is probably the true idea of the avant-garde. Not the idea that you go forward, but the idea that you are living in a time which is a time of conflicting times. The young Marx of the 1840s says in his texts on Hegel's "Theory of Right" and "The Critique of Hegel's Theory of Right," that modernity is divided because you have an emancipation of thought, in the German philosophy of freedom, but at the same time the administration and the policy of the German states are still feudal. Furthermore, Marx states that it is contrary to France where there is political action but no theoretical thinking. Therefore, we have a very different idea of the avant-garde. Avant-garde is the force that tries to deal with this conflict of times. The Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s becomes an example because film makers like Eisenstein, Vertov were not simply worshipers of the new economy, of the industry, but instead what they tried to do was to create with their art (as with all the so called avant-gardists) something like a kind of common fabric of common life or common sensorium. To create communism, at this moment there is an opposition between the idea of the avant-garde carried out by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (where revolution is a very long process with gradual steps) and furthermore, the idea of the avant-garde creating the idea of communism which was the project of many artists. Artists were concerned with doing a lot of things, creating forms of urban décor, creating posters, etc. It was also the idea of the avant-garde of the Bauhaus in Germany where you anticipate by creating some kind of aesthetic communism while social communism does not yet exist. Dziga Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* is a good example. The film is a diary of a day in a town with all the activities from morning to night. Most of those activities are not at all modern, not at all communist. They are everyday insignificant activities, but the film creates communism as the thread linking them all to make some kind of global symphony. You see women in a beauty parlor just having their nails done. There is nothing communist about this. What is important is not the activity in itself, but the way in which this activity of doing the nails is connected by the camera with the activity of the editor of the film, with cutting/scratching of the film and pasting and likewise a lot of different activities. So in this way we can say that the film maker creates a kind of aesthetic communism by creating a link between a multiplicity of activities which are utterly heterogeneous, and which in a way belong to very different ages: shoe-shining in the streets, as well as women working in the assembly line in the factories, or men working in a mine. This is for me what really the avant-garde meant from an aesthetic point of view.



**DC:** It is from the perspective of the everyday activities that I make a reference to Althusser here, specifically to his essay on Bertolt Brecht and Carlo Bertolazzi. There also we are confronted with the question of daily mundane activities specifically in Althusser's analyses of the performance of Bertolazzi's drama *El Nost Milan*. Here one gets to observe in detail the everyday of the sub-proletariat of 1890s Milan. Pertinent here is the way Althusser treats the mise-en-scène to foreground its significant materialist structures. How are you differentiating or deviating from the Althusserian structures in terms of signifying mundane activities?<sup>41</sup>

**JR:** What is important for Althusser is the dialectical idea. For him the representation is dealing not so much with the play as it is dealing with the mise-en-scène of Giorgio Strehler, because the play is a kind of melodrama. What is important for him is a kind of dialectical relation such that the mise-en-scène by Strehler shows that the characters of the play written by Bertolazzi belong to the ancient time. We see that those people are living in a kind of immobile world. So we become aware of the necessity of new time by looking at those people who live in this kind of immobile time. This is quite different, which is of course a Brechtian view, than looking, let us say in a simplistic way, at people who are doing things the bad way we understand the good way of doing things, which for me belongs to a second age of modernity. Because it is absolutely different from and absolutely not the position of Vertov. In Vertov, there is no question of becoming aware by seeing people doing badly. All those people who are doing heterogeneous things already belong to communism. They belong to the extent that the filmmaker, that the artist creates this common fabric within which all those activities are intertwined. Of course this is completely different with the argument of Althusser or with the Brechtian logic of the Althusserian arguments. For me this is the opposition between the aesthetic logic and the representative logic. Representative logic is a logic precisely in which you see people doing or behaving this way, and normally you see people who behave as bad people or as ignorant people and you learn from the ignorance. You learn from the ignorance and you become aware out of the ignorance. I very often cite this extraordinary statement by Roland Barthes about Brecht's *Mother Courage*. Barthes says because we see that Mother Courage is blind we become lucid. So we become aware by looking at somebody who is not aware. This is the representative logic. For me the aesthetic logic is entirely different because it is not a matter of seeing something, judging something and drawing some conclusion from what you saw to what you must do. It is a matter of being part of a kind of material transformation. The aesthetic logic, as in my example of Vertov, makes the spectator part of another way of being together, another way of being in a same space, another way for which all activities, all modes of doing are interrelated. This is the opposition to the representative logic where you are supposed to see people doing in a certain way and become conscious because they are not conscious and lucid because they are blind. This is the global framework of the difference.

**DC:** What could be the possible relation between cross-mediality or inter-mediality and the aesthetic regime of the arts? Might one consider the operations of aesthetic regime through crossovers across artistic media? In this context of crossovers might we regard your analyses, for example, of *Au Hasard Balthazar*, in which you refer to a certain fragmentation and the way this fragmentation become a site for reducing an action to its essence? Does this fragmentation proliferate references to cross-medial or inter-medial aesthetics? The multiple media that modernity applies, can those be assumed with such notions?<sup>42</sup>

**JR:** I don't use the notions of inter-mediality or cross-mediality as operators in my analysis. My discussion on *Au Hasard Balthazar* was about the image and the question as to whether the image is determined by the medium. I tried to say that the status of the

image, as an operation, is not determined by the medium. There was, at that moment, a discussion opposing cinema to television, saying that cinema produces image which are witnesses of alterity while in the television the image comes from the box, i.e., the image is just the effect of the box. I objected that you can define the image independently from the surface on which the image appears. In *Au Hasard Balthazar*, the images of Bresson must be first defined as operations and those operations are the same whether you see Bresson's film in a movie theater or whether you see it on the screen of the television. Of course the quality of the image is not the same, what you perceive is not the same but the operation that creates the image is the same. The cinematographic image is not the image of what has been in front of the filmmaker, for instance, at the beginning of *Au Hazard Balthazar*, a little girl, a little boy, and a donkey. The image is a certain set of operations which makes you expect something and something else appear on the screen and thereby you have a dissensus. The artistic image consists in making a form of connection between the words and the visible, between a shot and the following which runs different from the normal interconnection. Consensus means that you can reasonably predict the next image. This is often the case with television, but it is not an effect of the technical *dispositif*. It is the effect of the social *dispositif* within which it works. Instead, the image made by Bresson is an operation, a set of relation between a shot and an overshoot between the sound and a lot of operations. The artistic image is always in a form of disjunction or a form of dissociation. This for me is different from the questions of cross-mediality or inter-mediality. I don't define the image by the crossing of several media. I define it by a disjunction that can perfectly operate within one single medium, because (it may be the contrary) the disjunctions mean that you cannot define the nature of an image from simply the medium that produces it.

It is true that I also question this modernist idea that an art is defined by its specific medium, by its specific relation to its own medium. If modernity means something in art, it means a certain form of disruption of the normal distribution of the medium, of the normal use of the medium. This is what I tried also to say about typography, about the way in which the page of the book could be thought no more simply as the white surface on which text is printed but as having a certain form of autonomy or a certain form of interrelation with other pages which is not a matter of textual relation but a relation with the space. I discussed it about the case of Stephan Mallarmé. Mallarmé is supposed to be a poet emblematic of modernity as medium specificity. It is actually the contrary. He conceives of the problem in a way such that the problem is not simply textual, but rather concerns spatial distributions so that two pages of the book can become like a theater. A stage, that lets you imagine the relation of the letters and words on the page as a choreographic relation. I insisted that Mallarmé was inspired by dances, musicals, etc. He tried to rethink poetry by imagining some kind of writing in space which was more or less inspired by forms of dance and performance in theaters and musicals. It is very important for me in the history of modernist art or avant-gardist art to chalk out this attempt to go through different media and to create new forms of sensory fabric by mixing different mediums and the laws of different mediums. Putting together poetry and dance or perhaps choreography and film, theater and circus, etc. They all are history of the really high moment of modernism in art, when there were attempts to create new forms of time, space, and performance blending coming from different arts. From poetry, from painting, from theater, from dance, from gymnastic, from sports.

The problem with the idea of cross-mediality is that it implies that you have technical tools to create cross-medialities. But the crossing is aesthetic before being technical. In the case of a video-installation, the television monitor at the same time can play the role of a sculpture defined by the volume that it occupies in the space and the role of the flat surface on which you see mobile images. It is an example among many examples. You can

create all kinds of mixing of image, of video, of sculpture, of music, of performance, etc. If you think of the high moment of the modernist project it was not possible for this kind of cross-mediality to exist. There were no computers, no video, sound systems, etc. When Mallarmé tried to create the page as a theatrical stage he had none of our technical means. Now [it] is quite easy. You see it in computer works, video works when effectively the page starts transforming itself in a film, dance, etc. He had not the technical tools, but he had the aesthetic program. What interests me is this kind of anticipation—that the aesthetic of cross-mediality exists before the technological means. This is very important for me. There was this big argument everywhere that art is transformed by new technology accompanied by a simplistic reading of Benjamin about the mechanical arts. I tried to question these simplistic ideas that new technologies create new forms of art. Cinema and photography do not simply become art as a consequence of technology because the technology has existed long ago before photography and film were recognized as art. Being included in the sphere of art presupposes a certain aesthetic. The aesthetic is not the simple consequence of the technological but rather it exists before the technological. Photography could become an art when it stopped trying to be artistic by a lot of procedures and instead adopted the realistic aesthetic that was created in the novel, the idea that you can create beauty with the everyday, with the mundane. There was a long time during which photography tried to create some kind of fantastic atmosphere by a lot of technical artefacts, which did not work. It worked when photography decided to show cars in the street, chimneys of factories and boats, the spectacle of the street, etc. Thus, cross-mediality becomes part of the same logic, meaning that the aesthetic of cross-mediality existed before the technologies of cross-mediality. If you think of the art of the post-1910s and 1920s, sometimes posters, plain two-dimensional surfaces try to create some kinds of reconstruction of the architecture of the common world. The technical means are not there but the project is there.

**DC: Can the dissolution of the artistic genres as in the aesthetic regime become a corollary in the political processes as well? By that I mean as to whether the blueprints of the diverse forms of collective living so akin to the aesthetic regime translate into an “eclectic” model for political regimes where the strategies of revolution pertaining to definite social categories get intertwined?**

**JR:** Revolution is always made of different temporalities. It was quite important that the 1968 student uprising in Paris started with barricades in the streets, which was a very old fashioned strategy. Even during the 1848 revolution one of the socialist leaders, Louis Auguste Blanqui, said that the barricade from the military point of view is really counterproductive. But the barricade is not only a military instrument. It is a way of constructing a certain opposition between the protest and the government or society. In a military struggle it is anachronistic. But you have very different elements and very different temporalities which get into revolutionary or subversive situations. I do not think it is a matter of eclecticism. Wherever you had in history a kind of revolutionary moment or situation you had a lot of elements that were heterogeneous. You may have the military aspect or the symbolical aspect (*mise-en-scène*) and they belong to different moments. In the French revolution of 1789, you have elements belonging to all traditions of popular riots, because popular riots happen very often in history. But there is a moment when a popular riot, belonging to a long history, acquires a quite different form of visibility. Why? For instance, if you take the Bastille Day in France (14 July 1789), where the crowd of Paris attack the prison of the Bastille, it is an old-fashioned popular riot. But this old-fashioned popular riot takes on an entirely new meaning because at that moment there is the national assembly in Versailles: the representatives called by the king, in the frame of an old monarchic form of gathering of the people, had decided to change their own status and to become representatives of the people. In this context the popular

uprising acquires an entirely new meaning. It becomes a manifestation of the sovereign people. So you must have this kind of visibility given by the assembly gathered in Versailles to give to what happens in the streets of Paris. You may have at the same time uprisings in the country and uprisings in the streets of the town, a kind of insurrection on the official stage itself. You have multiplicity, in any situation, of forms of struggles, of forms of symbolization. For me this means it is not a matter of eclecticism. The point is that “normally” there should not be revolutions. So when they happen, they happen because of heterogeneous elements belonging to different temporalities at the same time. In Paris 1968, you have the students making barricades which is entirely old-fashioned, a memory of the nineteenth century. At the same time there was one factory in the French provinces in Nantes where strikers had sequestered the managers in their office. This was a new form of the sit-in strike. At that moment the students took up the workers’ practice of occupation by occupying the Sorbonne. Afterwards factories were occupied everywhere in France. There is this kind of exchange: the students creating a global stage and giving its meaning to a single strike. Also there are kinds of exchanges which create global movements or global stages composed of things entirely (not entirely) independent from each other. The problem with so many theories on revolution is that they always try to think of itself as the distinct process with the idea that there is a strategy and there is an uprising and after that there is the result. It never works. The point is not let us say theory against eclecticism. It is the reality of the multiplicity of processes against the idea of a clear cut deduction of causes and effects coming from a strategy. You have always the same kind of discourse where ever you have a movement. There are always those people saying that there is no strategy, no program, so this is just shit. But movements always came first and movements always were heterogeneous.

**DC: Your espousal of the politics of equality is connected to a redistribution of the sensorium regarding any regime of police—be it theory, history, discipline, law, occupation, genre, pedagogy, “pure” politics. In this regard what could be the point of departures of these disjunctive aesthetic regime/s from the violent aporetic notion of deconstruction, where deconstruction primarily refers to questions on the ontological?**

**JR:** I do not have this systematic idea that you try to describe. The idea of deconstruction supposes there is a kind of global, dominant discourse and that it is the work of the philosopher to deconstruct the global discourse, logocentrism, or any kind of things like this. In the case of Derrida, there is a kind of mainstream construction of Western reason and then you have to deconstruct it. Perhaps the point is not deconstructing the dominant logic than really trying to identify the elements that constructs such logic. That was my point about revolution which is made up of many processes. The point is not deconstructing the idea of revolution as a kind of manifestation of a global idea of Western reason. It is trying to identify the points, the places when and where there are disruptions and try to think how this singular can or cannot make a whole. Such operation is also what is important for me in the question of literary democracy. The fact that literary democracy is not the same as political democracy. You can define multiplicity of forms of disruptions that do not add up to make a kind of global deconstruction. I was trying to identify specific singular forms of disruptions that may be for instance thinking of social emancipation through the diaries of workers. It can be the thinking of literary disruptions from something specific, that it is always trying to think out of and from the consideration of singularities. I never decided to work on politics. I am not interested in reconstructing or deconstructing political traditions. I am interested in trying to think as to how, in a certain historical circumstance, the very idea of being a worker takes on a new meaning. My point about emancipation was trying to think what happens in the experiences of a number of workers at a specific moment in history that produces this “subjectivation,” this reversal of the signification of the world. This process is what

interests me at the same time when I try to identify some specific operations in the history of art in the Western world from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. There are moments when something which was not supposed to be art becomes art, when a show in a music-hall (Loïe Fuller) can inspire a poet (Mallarmé) and makes him think there is a new aesthetic in the mere development of a gown. There are moments when techniques such as photography, cinema, etc., become art. What interests me is always the construction of some kind of global logic from singularities. I am not interested in Western reason in general. Philosophers are obsessed with the ontological as a kind of global or fundamental level from which you can deduce all forms of subversions and all forms of singularities. So they think that they can from the ontological level define what politics is, what art is, what science is. I think that usually the results of such operations are rather disappointing because the singular is always the repetition or reformulation of the ontological. There are always these attempts to create some kind of wrong deductions because everything must cohere. There is no evidence that there is a global rationality linking what we call art, what we call politics, etc. I think that all those things are singularities that happen in a contingent way in the history of a part of the world. Sometimes I am told that what I say about the history of art are not valid because I don't take into account other traditions like the Chinese one. But I am no art historian. I am interested in modes of construction of worlds, the art world or the world of politics for instance, that are done by putting things and words, situations and significations together. The Chinese tradition of painting is certainly different from the Western tradition. But that's not my point. I have studied the way in which a certain regime of identification of art was created in the Western world alongside other traditions and other modes of conceptualization and the way in which this regime has acquired a certain form of universality that makes that the same idea of the art world structure the practices of artist and curators today in China as well as in Brazil, Nigeria, Russia, or any other country in spite of all the differences of the traditions of art making in those countries.

**DC: Do these singularities manifest themselves in terms of art through a “return” of the pure surficial encounters in representations, i.e., the necessity of the “surficial” which introduces indistinctions between itself and its disavowal?**

**JR:** I can't really know. For me the present and perhaps the future is more about heterogeneity. The idea pertaining to modernity in art elaborated around the 1930s or 1940s, insisted that the destiny of art was abstraction. According to this logic (if you think of Clement Greenberg) there was this idea that old painting was representation and new painting is abstraction. And it was totally wrong. This means that abstraction was part of something much more global, much more complicated that could produce things entirely different. What for me characterizes the aesthetic regime is the possibility of multiplicity of things. It is in fact really the withdrawal of any principle of global legitimacy which becomes very important. If you think about painting there was a time when it was possible to say this was a good painting for this or that reason. Within the aesthetic logic there is no such possibility. There are some technical procedures that try to implement certain ideas to create some kind of space, some kind of sensorium and people really relate themselves to that sensorium but no more with this idea that “it is beautiful because of this or that.” It is not my decision but I think we really live in a multiplicity of possibles. There are certain forms that are dominant at certain moments; it can be abstract painting, it can be installation. But basically what we are looking at now are a multiplicity of things. One of the performances of the Venice Biennale in 2015 was the reading of Marx's *Capital*. During the six months of the Venice Biennale, there were people reading entirely the *Capital*. The reading of the *Capital* is an artistic performance alongside with the multiplicity of other artistic performances. Therefore, the idea of performance can now can include anything. It can include the reading of a book, as well as the construction of a

space. I do not think now you can say either the future is the surface or future is the destruction of the surface though we are at a time when perhaps those distinctions are not working. The space of art is not the global construction according to judgment of value. The global configuration of the space is more important than what is in that space. In the space you can have videos, screenings, paintings, living performance. It is the whole space which is now the work of art. There is this kind of reconstruction of space and of course it is still more obvious because so many art spaces now are disused factories and arsenals, etc. Art is made by the configuration of space more than it is made by the collection of artworks in those spaces.

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## Notes

1. Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 7. [↗](#)
2. Please refer to Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 3–21. [↗](#)
3. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer, Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 172–173. [↗](#)
4. Kant, *Critique*, 172–173. [↗](#)
5. Kant, *Critique*, 172–173. [↗](#)
6. For further study on the equivalence of experience to content, see Friedrich Schiller, *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, ed. N. H. Dole (Boston: Francis A. Niccolls & Co, 1902), 3–110. [↗](#)
7. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [↗](#)
8. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [↗](#)
9. G. V. Plekhanov, *Art and Social Life*, trans. A. Fineberg (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 5. [↗](#)
10. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [↗](#)
11. Greenberg, *Art*, 5. [↗](#)
12. Greenberg, *Art*, 6. [↗](#)
13. Greenberg, *Art*, 7. [↗](#)
14. Greenberg, *Art*, 7. [↗](#)
15. Greenberg, *Art*, 14–15. [↗](#)
16. Greenberg, *Art*, 14–15. [↗](#)
17. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 22–25. Here, I particularly refer to Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, where he tries to develop a philosophy of the arts through scientific conceptualizations. [↗](#)
18. See Greenberg's attempt to locate Rembrandt as the first potential avant-garde. Greenberg, *Art*, 17. [↗](#)
19. Greenberg, *Art*, 6. [↗](#)
20. Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 180. It must be mentioned here that Sartre never espoused autonomy in art. [↗](#)
21. Friedrich Schiller, *Aesthetical and Philosophical Essays*, ed. N. H. Dole (Boston: Francis A. Niccolls & Co, 1902), 73. [↗](#)
22. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010), 116. [↗](#)
23. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 116. [↗](#)

24. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensations* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 22 and 162. [↗](#)
25. Panagia, *Political Life*, 22 and 162. [↗](#)
26. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 25. [↗](#)
27. Panagia, *The Political Life*, 22. [↗](#)
28. Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensations* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), 22 and 162. [↗](#)
29. Panagia, *Political Life*, 22 and 162. [↗](#)
30. Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 25. [↗](#)
31. Panagia, *The Political Life*, 22. [↗](#)
32. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1962), 290–302. [↗](#)
33. Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 298. [↗](#)
34. Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 297–310. [↗](#)
35. Michel Foucault, "Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of 'Political Reason,'" <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/f/foucault81.pdf>. [↗](#)
36. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 95. [↗](#)
37. Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 13–32. [↗](#)
38. Jacques Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London & New York: Continuum, 2006), 26–30. [↗](#)
39. Greenberg, *Art*, 3–21. [↗](#)
40. Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis*, trans. Zakir Paul (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 55–74. [↗](#)
41. Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 129–152. [↗](#)
42. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 5. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)

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